

Principal Sabbatical Report

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PURPOSE

To further develop my professional knowledge of how parental engagement contributes to student achievement in schools; to inquire into how schools could encourage greater engagement of Pasifika* parents in our schools; and to provide an opportunity for Pasifika* "voice" to be heard as we work to involve them in student learning.

*The term "Pasifika" refers to people who identify with the Pacific Islands because of their ancestry or heritage. These people may have immigrated to New Zealand or may have been born here.

SPECIFIC KEY QUESTIONS THAT WILL HOPEFULLY BE ANSWERED THROUGH THIS STUDY:

- What does current research tell us about parental engagement and the contribution this makes to student learning?
- How have some South Auckland schools with high numbers of Pasifika students attempted to engage Pasifika parents?
- What role do parents play in the Tongan education system?
- What do the parents of Pasifika students perceive as barriers / difficulties in becoming engaged in their children's learning?
- What can schools do to remove these barriers and encourage Pasifika parent engagement?

BACKGROUND

In 2001 I became principal of St Joseph's School Pukekohe. At that time 89% of the students on the school roll were classified as New Zealand European. Pasifika students made up approximately 5% of the roll. Today 63 % of our students are New Zealand European and 17.5 % of our students are of Pasifika decent.

Based on data collected at the end of 2010, 61% of our Year 3 – 8 Pasifika students were not achieving National Standards in Reading; 44% were not achieving National Standards in Mathematics; and 52% were not achieving National Standards in Writing.

At St Joseph's School Pukekohe we encourage parental engagement in student education through such things as parent / teacher conferences, parent education meetings, and family whanau meetings. Generally speaking we find that Pasifika parents are less likely to be involved in these initiatives.

Prior to my appointment as principal of St Joseph's Pukekohe I spent over twenty years teaching in low decile schools in South Auckland. All of these schools had high numbers of Pasifika students enrolled. Again my experience was that in general Pasifika parents were less likely to be involved in school based activities related to their children's learning. I must acknowledge however that both at St Joseph's Pukekohe and at the schools I taught at in South Auckland, some Pasifika parents were effectively engaged in their children's education. It is not my intention to be judgmental of parents who are not so involved and it would indeed be unjust for me to suggest that lack of engagement in children's education applies to all Pasifika parents.

METHODOLOGY

The following were the key parts of my sabbatical programme:

1. Research and reflection of relevant literature on the engagement of parents in the education of their children. My focus here included:
 - Defining the meaning of 'parent engagement' in schools.
 - What evidence is there to suggest that parent engagement contributes to greater student achievement?
 - What evidence is there concerning effective engagement of Pasifika families in New Zealand schools?
 - What basic principles contribute to successful engagement of parents?
2. Visits to schools with a high number of Pasifika students who have implemented specific programmes or practices aimed at engaging Pasifika parents in children's learning. I specifically asked principals, and other personnel at these schools, what they had done to try and engage parents and what underlying principles they felt ensured successful engagement of Pasifika parents.
3. Visits to schools in Tonga where I spoke with principals and teachers, and visited some classrooms. I also met with some key people associated with Catholic Education in Tonga. The purpose of visiting Tonga was to learn what role parents played in the education of their children in that country.
4. Interviews with Pasifika parents from our school and other areas in Auckland with a view to finding out:
 - What helps them to be involved in schools and engaged in student learning?
 - What barriers are there for them to be involved in schools and engaged in student learning?

In interviewing parents/ whanau I met with a group of Kiribati families in Pukekohe, a group of Tongan families in Papatoetoe, and a group of Samoan families in Papatoetoe. The group of Kiribati parents I interviewed were all relatively new migrants with most of them arriving in New Zealand within the last five years. The Tongan parents I interviewed were mainly Tongan born people who had spent a considerable time in New Zealand (15 years+). The Samoan parents I interviewed were a mixture of New Zealand born and Samoan born people. Again the Samoan born people had been in New Zealand for a considerable length of time (15+ years)

At all three meetings I posed the above mentioned questions and had a representative at each meeting translate them into Kiribati, Samoan or Tongan. I encouraged the people present to discuss these questions in small groups in their first language. Key people from each group then fed back responses.

In addition to the group meetings for Kiribati, Samoan and Tongan parents, I spoke to some parents on a one to one basis. These parents were generally all New Zealand born Pasifika people who were happy to speak to me in

English, or were parents born in Pacific Island countries that have a good command of English and were comfortable speaking to me in English.

5. As a result of 1-4 above I reflected on and critically analysed strategies for involving Pasifika parents, and considered what changes we could make at St Joseph's Pukekohe in order to enhance the engagement of Pasifika parents.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Through extensive reading around the topic of parent engagement I found that there were conflicting understandings of what constituted *parent engagement* and what constituted *parent involvement*. Some academics used the term *parent involvement* to mean the same as *parent engagement* while others used the term *parent involvement* to mean something quite different. (Pushor, 2007) referred to *parent involvement* as being passive with parents involved in school driven activities, such as fundraising and parent helpers on school trips. On the other hand she refers to *parent engagement* as parents being actively involved in dialogue and decisions around student learning. Henderson & Mapp (2002) provide a different understanding of *parental involvement* as they refer to a framework of Six Types of Parental Involvement. These types of parental involvement include parental expression of ideas; discussion between parent and school about what children are learning; parent involvement with student learning at home; parents attending and being involved in school events; and parent interaction within the community. Other writers would refer to such parent involvement as *parent engagement*. Christenson & Sheridan (2001) refer to *parent engagement* as an overarching principle and approach involving the collaborative partnership between teachers, families and communities to promote learning and the educational achievement of children. The use of the word *engagement* implies a sharing of roles, knowledge and perspectives for mutual benefit. Sykes (as cited in Pushor, 2007) implies moral commitment is an integral and essential part of engagement. Teachers and parents are working together - using their knowledge to inform decision making. There is equality between parents and school staff and both have expertise to contribute. (Pushor, 2007)

Links between parent engagement/ parent involvement and student achievement

Literature provides us with overwhelming evidence that parental engagement does lead to improved educational achievement for children. Pushor (2007) suggests parental engagement contributes to greater success at school through higher student attendance rates, improved student behaviour and greater involvement of students in learning. Jeynes (as cited in Pushor 2007) suggests that these indicators transcend social economic status and race, and that all children are advantaged by parental engagement. Henderson & Mapp (2002) support this idea and found a growing body of evidence to suggest that student achievement improves, students stay at school longer, and students enjoy school more, when schools, families and communities work together. Desforges (2003) goes further in his literature and reports that the values and aspirations that parents model in the home are also an important part of school involvement and these impact on the achievement of

students from all ethnic groups. He emphasises the close correlation between parental involvement early in a child's school life, and eventual student achievement. Adrienne Alton-Lee (2003), in her best evidence syntheses commissioned by the New Zealand Ministry of Education, also documents the benefits of effective parental engagement in education. She suggests that in addition to enhancing student achievement at school, parental involvement in education assists students in adult life and civic participation.

Effective engagement of Pasifika families in New Zealand schools.

While there is an abundance of universal evidence suggesting that parent engagement contributes to the educational achievement of students there appears to be limited information related specifically to Pasifika students.

Gorinski and Fraser (2006) report that families have a key role to play in children's academic success. Comer and Nissani, (as cited in Gorinski and Fraser 2006) comment on how the attitudes and values of families have a profound affect on student behaviour and academic learning. Gorinski and Fraser (2006) note that for cultural and minority ethnic groups there is often a disparity between their values, beliefs, expectations and experiences and those of the dominant culture. The Education Review Office (2012) supports this noting that strong school-home links are of particular importance for children whose social class, culture, and/or ethnicity and cultural heritages differ from those predominant in the school. Adrienne Alton-Lee (2003) also presents evidence that home school partnerships are particularly important when the child's language and cultural background is significantly different from what is predominant in the school setting. This highlights the absolute need to build links between the home culture and the school culture so that schools and parents can work in partnership to meet the needs of the child. Gorinski and Fraser (2006) report that in order to engage Pasifika parents in student learning and school decision making, schools need to develop strong relationships with Pasifika families recognising their culture and the diverse ethnicities within the Pasifika families. There needs to be mutual respect and trust within these relationships. Schools need to empower communities by seeking their advice and assistance. The locus of power can no longer rest with schools. Valdes, (as cited in Gorinski and Fraser 2006) points out that historically parents have rarely been consulted in the establishment of home school partnerships. Gorinski and Fraser (2006) conclude that in order to develop effective parent engagement, practice in schools must change. Practices must be developed more through a multicultural lens. The Education Review Office (2012) also recommends schools look at culturally appropriate ways of engaging Pasifika families in student learning.

Principles contributing to the successful engagement of parents

Literature provides schools with many models for the successful engagement of parents. Many of the principles involved in these models are reflected in criteria published by the *Education Review Office (2011)*. The first of these criteria is leadership. If there is to be meaningful engagement between schools and their communities there must to be a strong, authentic commitment to this by school leaders. Secondly effective partnerships between school and their communities need to be built on effective relationships underpinned by mutual trust and respect. There needs to be an authentic sharing of responsibilities for student learning and well-

being. To build successful engagement of parents the school needs to have a culture of inclusiveness where parents are able to share in decision making and feel comfortable asking questions and sharing concerns. Teachers and parents need to work together to provide opportunities for learning and sharing. Through such partnerships parents will strengthen their understanding of their child's learning while also feeling that their contributions are valued. Effective community consultation is essential to parent community engagement. By sharing expertise community parents and school are able to develop a shared understanding of priorities for student achievement. Underlying all of these criteria is the need for clear effective communication. Communication must be appropriate for everyone involved. Communication barriers must be identified and overcome.

Research from *The Pennsylvania Office of Child Development and Early Learning* (2009) reinforces the principles needed for successful parental engagement. Again effective communication is at the top of the list. In being a good communicator educators should not only be good speakers but also good listeners. Communication strategies need to allow for the on-going reciprocal sharing of information. Written information needs to be simple, clear, and easy to understand. If we want parents to engage in education we must create a welcoming environment and attitude. When parents come in to the school environment they should be greeted with warmth and friendship. Teachers should encourage families to talk about their child and share information giving a clear message that parent information about the child is important and valued. Teachers should look for ways to affirm parents acknowledging the contribution they make to their child's education and the support they give to their child's learning. Educators must appreciate the cultural and ethnic diversity of families and aim to learn about their diverse backgrounds. If needed information should be made available in the family's first language. In seeking to engage parents, schools must make sure that school events are at times families can potentially attend. Schools may be able to offer workshops at two different times to accommodate families. Providing childcare at events and notifying parents of the provisions in advance may also encourage parental engagement. Home visits may be utilized for parents who cannot come to school. If teachers are visiting homes they should be sensitive to the parent/ family's protocols and act accordingly.

FINDINGS FROM VISITS TO SCHOOLS IN TONGA

The education personnel I spoke to in Tonga placed importance on developing relationships with parents and having them engage in their child's learning but in general many educators reported that this was still a work in progress. They felt parents wanted their children to do well in school and saw education as being very important to their child's future however when it came to getting involved in school life, and engaging in the education of their child, many parents struggled. Feedback from teachers and principals tended to suggest that well educated Tongan people were more likely to be engaged in a way that supported their child's learning, but for other parents their level of involvement was limited.

Schools reported holding parent teacher interviews and open days once or twice a year and these were generally well supported by the parents or members of the child's extended family, especially at high school level and at year 6 of primary, as at this level students need to pass an examination before being accepted for high school. One teacher spoke of the parents' reluctance to come to parent interviews if they thought they were only going to hear negative messages about their child.

Many of the teachers and principals I met in Tonga appeared to be well versed in modern pedagogy and were trying to involve students in inquiry learning however parental engagement in this learning is still an area for development. One high school had tried conducting workshops in different villages to help parents understand the way in which they were educating their children and this initiative had met with some success. At these workshops school personnel explained inquiry learning to parents. They pointed out the importance of critical thinking and asking relevant questions rather than just learning by rote or reproducing information downloaded from internet sites.

Two principals spoke of how the traditional social structure of Tongan society impacts on parental engagement in schools. They spoke of the royal family, noble and commoner class system and how for generations commoners had been taught that to be respectful you listened and did what was expected of you. Commoners were generally passive, rather than assertive, and this extended to their involvement in schools. They had absolute trust in the *expert* teachers to educate their children and they did not always perceive that they as parents had a role in this. As a sign of respect for educators, who in their culture had a higher social status than them, parents did not question the actions of school staff. The two principals who spoke of this realised that to have genuine parental engagement this traditional model had to be reformed and this is something that will take time.

Other principals spoke of the day to day struggles of poorer and less well educated Tongan people and how this impacts on their ability to engage in their child's education. Some parents do not have the financial means to fund basic school stationery requirements, and poverty and overcrowded living conditions make it difficult for parents to support children's education at home. This can be as simple as providing time and space for the child to do their homework. Sometimes as parents are busy working to provide for the material needs of the family, older children are expected to take responsibility for household chores and care of younger siblings. This can result in poor attendance rates or the children often being late for school. One primary school principal spoke of how some parents want their children to do well and succeed at school but when it comes to being involved or engaged in their child's learning, these parents have other priorities. Another educator said that education was not a priority for all parents especially when the family owned a plantation which would eventually be inherited by the eldest son. In these situations

families would sometimes keep children, especially the eldest son, home to work on the plantation or to go to the markets.

As I mentioned at the start of this section principals and teachers in Tonga understood the importance of establishing relationships with parents and parental engagement in their child's learning. Principals and teachers sometimes visit parents in their homes to discuss children's progress and issues that have arisen. Principals and teachers are often involved, or live, in the local community so have multiple points of contact with parents. High schools sometimes use a newsletter system but primary schools do not do this with lack of resourcing being one reason. Primary schools sometimes send notes home to parents requesting a meeting. If parents have a telephone, which is not always the case, contact is made via telephone.

Schools I visited reported having school PTA groups who meet regularly. These groups are fundamentally responsible for fund raising and at times "working bees" to maintain the school grounds. With the schools receiving limited government funding there are limited funds for caretakers or cleaners therefore maintenance of the school grounds and buildings often falls back onto parents. In some of the village areas, where many parents are themselves struggling for financial survival, there is very little money for school maintenance or capital improvements. This results in some schools being poorly maintained and lacking basic resources. Schools I visited in the capital, Nukualofa, tended to be better maintained and resourced.

When I spoke to some parents in Tonga about points raised by the various educators they did partially agree. They felt that sometimes parents who had limited education themselves found it difficult to become engaged in their child's education. They often did not know how to support their child's learning at home especially when it came to homework set for older children.

FINDINGS FROM VISITS TO SCHOOLS IN SOUTH AUCKLAND

EXAMPLES OF PRACTICES that school feel may have contributed to the successful engagement of Pasifika parents in student learning.

1. Parental engagement is listed as a priority in strategic and annual plans.
2. The development of parental engagement is listed as part of the principal's and teachers' performance agreement/job description.
3. A conscious decision has been made to employ good teachers of Pacific Island descent and schools have built on their cultural experience.
4. Bilingual staff have been appointed and are used as translators or to converse with parents in their first language.
5. Teacher aides of Pasifika descent work with Pasifika students.

6. The school includes a Pasifika focus / perspective in its local curriculum. It considers what learning contexts and experiences will best suit their Pasifika students.
7. Staff are involved in the local community. There are multiple points of contact and parents see them on a regular basis.
8. *Early Reading Together* and *Reading Together* programmes are facilitated for parents.
9. Community meetings are held for the various ethnic groups. A key contact is identified within each ethnic group. This person often liaises with and advocates for other Pasifika parents. Meetings are organised and chaired by Pasifika parents with school staff in attendance.
10. Parent evenings / workshops to help parents understand what the children are being taught and the way their children are being taught.
11. The establishment of vertical (whanau) teaching teams. This helps parents to build relationship with staff and engage with student learning. It provides more opportunity for teachers to set up whanau meetings with parents.
12. Various types of communication are used including Face Book and mobile phones (teachers give parents their mobile number). Newsletters and other important items are translated into Pasifika languages. Verbal communication is often found to be more effective than written language for Pasifika parents.
13. Employment of school social workers and school nurses encourages the engagement of parents.
14. Professional learning and development is used to up skill teachers in what works for Pasifika learners.
15. Teachers' knowledge of cultural practices is developed.
16. Pasifika cultures are reflected in the school's physical environment e.g. building of fale shelters, display of tapa cloth and other Pasifika artefacts, the planting of palm trees and other Pasifika shrubs.
17. The principal makes connections and builds relationships with Pasifika families by acknowledging new babies, special occasions and having knowledge of the various Pacific Island cultures.
18. Principal's office reflects aspects of Pasifika culture.
19. There is a focus on ensuring parents have a successful experience when dealing with school staff.
20. The principal, or other senior staff members, interview all new entrants and their parents.
21. The principal and other senior staff have a presence in the school grounds at the end of the school day and get to know parents – learning their names and pronouncing them correctly.
22. Cultural festivals.
23. Open evenings.
24. Sports events –school grounds are made available for community sports groups to practise.

25. The development of a school outreach programme with a sister school in the Pacific.
26. A school brochure advertising the school contains some Pasifika languages and Pasifika images.
27. Pasifika languages are used for worship and prayer.
28. School and parish community work together.
29. The school acknowledges and celebrates special days in the various Pasifika cultures e.g. Samoan Independence celebrations, the death of the King of Tonga.
30. Flags from various Pacific Nations are flown alongside the New Zealand flag.

FINDINGS FROM INTERVIEWS WITH PASIFIKA PARENTS IN NEW ZEALAND

The barriers identified, in terms of parental engagement in their children's education, and how these could be overcome, were as outlined below. I must emphasise however that not all of these barriers were identified by all parents.

Parents not familiar / confident with the English language – shy to speak to teachers. While they acknowledged that schools often encouraged them to bring along an interpreter this was not always easy for them to do. Their preference was for the school to have someone on staff who could act as an interpreter or for the school to access interpreters as needed. Some parents also spoke of the need for English classes for parents.

Financial constraints. Many people spoke of the difficulty in paying for school attendance dues in the Catholic school system and paying for extra-curricular activities. While I pointed out that we have systems in place to help families with hardship issues parents explained that in their culture admitting they couldn't afford to pay for something was very shameful. This was a particular issue for the Kiribati people. Some of these people reported working for very minimal wages therefore they had to work long hours to make ends meet. This sometimes made it difficult for them to attend school appointments and activities. Many were also still expected to send money home to family in the islands. Some parents inquired about the possibility of more scholarships to enable their children to attend more extra-curricular activities and to attend tertiary education.

Time Constraints. The Samoan & Tongan parents especially talked about their heavy involvement in church activities and how this sometimes impacts on their ability to be engaged in school related activities. Some parents also spoke of the conflict between financing church related activities versus school costs. Some parents also acknowledged that they did not have, or did not make, the time to check up on children's homework. They believed their children were doing homework but sometimes found out that this was not the case.

Limited face to face contact with teachers. Parents, especially the Samoan & Tongan parents, spoke about their desire to meet with teachers more often in face to face situations. They would like parent teacher interviews / conferences more often – once a term instead of the usual twice a year. They spoke about their frustration in

attending parent teacher interviews mid-year and hearing about children's behaviour / learning / attendance issues. They spoke of their desire for teachers to contact them as soon as possible when issues arose rather than waiting for the formal interviews. They also would like more communication from schools if their child's attendance is causing concern rather than attendance just being reported at mid-year as unsatisfactory.

Access to ICT tools. Some Samoan parents spoke passionately about the assumption of schools that all parents had access to, and were able to use, a computer in order to access web based information. These parents emphasised that the reality is not all parents have access to or can confidently use a computer. Some parents reported having difficulty accessing their children's school results via a web based system.

Understanding students' reports. This was problematic for some parents. They spoke of university reports, NCEA reports and National Standards reports. They suggested the traditional 1 – 10 ranking would be easier for parents to understand.

Understanding students' homework requirements. Parents sometimes found it difficult to understand homework requirements and were unable to assist students with homework. Some parents spoke of not understanding concepts or methodologies being taught and therefore not being able to assist children at home.

Relationships with teachers. Some parents spoke of the relationship between teachers and parents, and teachers and students, and how this impacted on their engagement in education. Parents reported that when they were made to feel welcome during their very first visit to the school, they found it easier to subsequently approach school personnel. A few parents spoke of the negative experiences they had encountered in meeting with teachers. Some of these parents, who were generally well educated New Zealand born parents, felt that some teachers sometimes spoke to them as if they were children, lecturing them and not giving them the respect they would like. They spoke of differences between home and school culture and how a lack of understanding on the part of some teachers had led to conflict. They would like teachers to give parents greater opportunity to explain their cultural perspective. Some of the Tongan parents also spoke of difficulties they had when their children believed teachers "picked" on Pasifika children. Several Pasifika high school students, who were present at the meeting, were able to give specific examples of times when they felt discriminated against at school.

CONCLUSION

Based on the information gathered through this research there are some fundamental things we can implement in order to engage Pasifika parents more fully in their children's education. These include schools considering ways of building mutually respectful relationships with families. These are fundamental to effectively engaging parents (Gorinski & Fraser 2006). In developing these relationships we must appreciate differences and value community input. School personnel must develop a knowledge and understanding of the particular cultures represented in their schools and respond to the various world views held by people. (The Ministry of Education's Pasifika Education Plan 2009-2012)

In creating links between home and school cultures, schools could ensure that the school physical environment reflects elements of diverse cultures and that planned curriculum programmes make links between the home and school culture. Adrienne Alton Lee (2003) emphasises the extreme importance of creating links to students' prior experience and knowledge in order for learning to be successful.

Effective communication is crucial in the development of parent community – school relationships. While in this 21st century there is obviously a place for the use of ICT tools in communicating with parents, school should be mindful of the importance of face to face contact with parents and the difficulties some parents may have in accessing and using ICT tools. Remembering that many of our Pasifika parents report feeling shy and lack confidence in speaking English, school personnel should look for ways of affirming Pasifika parents and encouraging them in their support of student learning. Schools should also be innovative in working to overcome language barriers. They could look to employ teachers who reflect the ethnic composition of the school. If this is not possible perhaps there is someone in the school community who could become a liaison person within each ethnic group and could also help with interpreting when needed.

Given the importance of parental engagement we need to explore different ways of developing partnerships with parents. We need to consider how and when we meet with parents. Does it always need to be at school? Does it always need to be organised by the school? What opportunities are there for multiple points of contact? Given the demands of work and church commitments for many of our Pasifika parents, are we able to be more flexible in timetabling meetings? Are we able to be more flexible in terms of how teachers spend out of class time to meet with parents?

In reporting student progress and achievement to parents how can we ensure parents have a clear understanding of their children's learning? If we expect them to access information via a web based programme such as a Learning Management System, what training do we need to give? Do we need to enable parents to access computers at school? If we expect them to understand that their child is working *below, at or above National Standards* do we need to help them to better understand what we mean by National Standards? How can we help parents to understand NCEA, and how to guide their children in career choices?

While we may encourage more parental involvement in schools by being more inclusive and developing better relationships with parents, as a result of my sabbatical study I am now convinced that to improve parental engagement in education we need to be developing formal home school partnerships. According to Adrienne Alton Lee (2003) home school partnerships, where there is some alignment between school and home practices, have a significant impact on student learning. Parents need to be involved in the planning of and running of these home / school partnerships. These partnerships need to help parents to support their children's

learning while also helping teachers to get to know students, their background, and their individual needs. Pushor (2007) reminds us that while it is important for parents to engage in their children's learning, it is also important for educators to engage in the worlds of families and communities out of school. Together we need to create a shared world that nurtures and educates our future citizens.

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